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ABSTRACT

Major logistical and value problems are described which confronted the Far West Laboratory's effort in developing and field testing high school student and teacher materials which make up a course entitled "Discussing Controversial Issues". Design to train both groups at the same time in basic appropriate discussion techniques, the course rationale is based on the idea that students should learn how to cope rationally with differences of opinion inherent in our pluralistic society. Four lessons emphasize the need for students to interact, listen to others, keep the discussion focused, and analyze different points of view. Problems that arouse concerned teacher role, opinion, and attitudes; selection of issues; participation of all class members; student materials and feedback; and course evaluation. Decision points reached are that: 1) teachers need to take an active role; 2) teachers do not view expression of their opinion as a problem; 3) teachers need to decide whether the course is appropriate for their style of instruction; 4) teachers view the selection of involved issues as a most difficult task; 5) discussions are fruitful when the class is divided into several discussion groups; and 6) students find materials which are concise and have high visual impact to be the most interesting. Pre-post tests indicated that teachers and students improved their use of some discussion techniques, although a few of the results were contrary to expectations. (SJM)

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Meredith D. Gall
Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development

For the past few years my colleagues and I have been developing materials to train high school teachers and students in techniques for discussing controversial issues. These materials are part of a larger effort of the Far West Laboratory's Teacher Education Program to develop a system of training in basic teaching skills for inservice and preservice teachers. The purpose of this paper is to describe major problems which confronted us as we developed and field tested the teacher handbook, student handbook, coordinator handbook, student evaluation packet, and instructional videotapes[1] which make up the course Discussing Controversial Issues.[2]

I will begin with a few comments about content and rationale. The primary emphasis of the course's four lessons is on techniques which teachers and students can use to improve their discussions of controversial issues. Since both teachers and students receive training at the same time, the materials can be viewed as a high school curriculum unit and as a teacher training project. (After teachers have studied the course content

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[1] These are currently being redone as 16mm color films.

[2] Further information about the course materials may be obtained by writing the author at: Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, 1 Garden Circle, Hotel Claremont, Berkeley, California 94705.

once, they can use the materials in other classes primarily as a curriculum unit.) Generally teachers learn how to play the role of discussion moderator, whereas students learn how to interact effectively as participants. The course is not a self-contained curriculum, since specific information about issues is not given; instead, teachers are shown how they can use an issues-orientation in different curriculum areas.

The specific lesson objectives and techniques are presented in Table 1. They concern various aspects of the discussion process: promoting student-to-student interaction; listening to others; keeping the discussion focused; critically analyzing different points of view; and taking stock of what happened in the discussion. Most of the specific discussion techniques were derived from the work of Donald Oliver, James Shaver, and Byron Massialas.[1]

The main rationale for developing the course is our belief, shared by many educators, that students should learn how to cope rationally with differences of opinion inherent in our pluralistic society. They need to critically examine conflicting values, evidence, and beliefs so that they can make informed choices on important issues. One way to accomplish these goals is for the teacher to initiate discussions that involve an open and informed exchange of views between students. The hoped-for consequence is that students will develop better insight into their own opinions and those held by others.

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[1] Oliver, D.W. and Shaver, J.P. Teaching public issues in the high school. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1966.
Massialas, Byron G., Sprague, Nancy F., and Sweeney, Jo A. Structure and process of inquiry into social issues in secondary classrooms. OE contract OEC 7-060678-2942, Department of HEW.

TABLE 1

DISCUSSING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

COURSE OBJECTIVE Develop skills for discussing controversial issues effectively.

MODERATORS	PARTICIPANTS
LESSON 1	
OBJECTIVE: Have an open discussion in which people feel free to say what they think.	
1. Support every person's right to his own opinion. 2. Use supportive silence to promote group interaction. 3. Distribute participation by calling on silent group members.	1. Talk to each other, not just the moderator. 2. Don't monopolize. 3. Ask others what they think. 4. Don't engage in personal attack.
LESSON 2	
OBJECTIVE: Listen to others and keep the discussion focused.	
1. State the issue at the beginning of the discussion. 2. Restate the issue to keep the discussion focused. 3. Summarize statements made by participants.	1. Listen to others' ideas. 2. Acknowledge others' ideas. 3. Question irrelevant remarks.
LESSON 3	
OBJECTIVE: Analyze different points of view.	
1. State areas of agreement or disagreement. 2. Ask for temporary agreements to break up deadlocks. 3. Ask for clarification. 4. Ask for reasons why someone holds a particular viewpoint.	1. Ask for clarification. 2. Ask for reasons for others' opinions. 3. Give reasons for your opinions.
LESSON 4	
OBJECTIVE: Evaluate the effectiveness of a discussion.	
1. Ask for a brief review. 2. Ask participants to explain viewpoints different from their own. 3. Ask participants to tell their current opinion and how the discussion affected it. 4. Ask about the next step for the group, or individuals.	1. Review the main points of the discussion. 2. Explain viewpoints different from yours. 3. Tell your current opinion and how the discussion affected it. 4. Suggest the next step for the group, or for you personally.

Problems and Decisions

All products developed by the Laboratory's Teacher Education Program are field tested at least three times prior to final release. Thus, the developers have the opportunity to incorporate an idea into a set of materials, try it out in a real-life setting, and revise on the basis of feedback. The problems and decision-points that arose as this process was applied to Discussing Controversial Issues will give the reader insight into the development of training materials of this type.

The Role of the Teacher

What role should the teacher play when the class is discussing a controversial issue? Our development staff took different points of view. One said the teacher should be neutral, passive, and silent in order to promote student-to-student interaction. Another said the teacher should take a strong hand in guiding the discussion; otherwise, students tend to drift from one issue to another, and to state opinions without supporting them. Someone even suggested that the teacher not be present, since he would tend to inhibit students from saying what they really think.

We could not locate research studies which would help us resolve this problem. Therefore, we had to rely on our own experience in observing class discussions. These observations demonstrated to us that usually a teacher does need to take an active role. If a teacher stays silent for more than several minutes, the discussion tends to become repetitive, a few students monopolize, and there is talking without thinking. Our initial instructional videotapes tended to encourage teacher silence by showing model teachers who provided exaggerated demonstrations of this behavior. Our

most recent materials have built in a more active role for the teacher, as shown in Table 1's list of moderator techniques. However, we have tried to define the moderator's role precisely so that the teacher can keep the discussion focused and informed without dominating the flow of conversation.

Should the Teacher Express an Opinion?

The argument has been made that teachers should not express their own point of view in a discussion since it unduly influences some students. No matter how the teacher qualifies his opinion, some students might adopt it because they view the teacher as an authoritative figure. Another argument to the same effect is that if the teacher expressed an opinion, some members of the community would act to block all discussion of controversial issues from the classroom. But this is only one side of the coin. There are educators who state that a teacher should state his opinion honestly and frankly if students ask for it. Otherwise the teacher will be unable to maintain a spirit of open inquiry in the classroom.

In actual practice, this issue has not confronted us. Teachers do not report it to be a problem, mainly because students rarely ask them for their opinion. Most students appear to accept the premise that the objective of a discussion is for them to express their own opinions; they are not interested in putting the teacher on the spot. The section of the teacher handbook of Discussing Controversial Issues pertaining to this problem has been reproduced at the end of this paper. In the spirit of the course, we have tried to take a flexible approach, pointing out the issue's various facets.

Teachers' Attitude Toward Issues Instruction

How do teachers feel about introducing the discussion of controversial issues into their classrooms? In the course's coordinator handbook, and in our own field tests, we have recommended that teachers be given the opportunity to preview the materials before agreeing to use them. This self-selection procedure insures to a certain degree that participating teachers have positive attitudes toward dealing with controversy. Occasionally, however, we meet a teacher who may superficially accept controversy, but in fact has a deep-seated bias against it as an approach to curriculum. This type of teacher is usually very concerned about promoting group harmony in his classroom. He believes that if differences between students on issues are exposed, students will become antagonistic toward each other and the class will fall apart.

Some of us who have worked on the course do not agree with this position. Nevertheless, we feel that it is a point of view which should be respected. Therefore, the preview procedures (looking over the materials, engaging in simulated discussions, talking with other teachers) are designed to give teachers an awareness of what the course involves and its potential for changing typical classroom interaction patterns. In short, we create an opportunity for the teacher to decide whether the course is appropriate for his style of instruction.

Selecting Issues for Discussion

Teachers who have participated in our field tests tell us that their most difficult task is selecting interesting, involving issues around which they can practice particular discussion skills. Through interviews and observation, we have discovered at least three reasons for this problem.

The first is that teachers sometimes select an issue about which students do not disagree with each other. Of course, even when students are in agreement, teachers can still "teach" the issue, but the discussion process we advocate is not appropriate. Another reason for the problem is that sometimes an issue is selected about which students have relatively little information. When this is the situation, students tend to offer their opinions, and then the discussion peters out. A third reason why an issue sometimes falls flat is that the teacher has not involved students in its selection.

We have used these observations and insights in revising the course materials. For example, we suggest to teachers that they poll their class on a variety of issues to determine where there is consensus and where there is difference of opinion. We also advise teachers to occasionally select school or local issues, or to phrase the issue in personal terms (e.g. what would you do if you had to make the decision?).

Whole Class Discussions

One of the primary goals of Discussing Controversial Issues is to help teachers create a discussion environment in which students interact openly with each other. However, this goal conflicts with the reality that most high school teachers have to deal with thirty or more students at a time. How do you create a true exchange of views in such a large group? All that most teachers can hope for is to involve a small subgroup of the students while the others sit and, hopefully, listen.

Our solution to this problem has met with a fair degree of success. Through the course materials we have shown teachers how they can break up

their class into several discussion groups --usually two or three. The teacher serves as moderator of one of the groups so that he can practice the discussion techniques covered in the course; students are selected to serve as moderators of the other discussion groups. Most teachers are willing to try this approach, and they find it to be one of the positive outcomes of the course. The only problem with several ongoing discussions is that the classroom tends to be noisy. Also, the noise level occasionally makes it difficult for the teacher to audiotape part of his discussion. The purpose of the audio recording is to provide self-feedback to the teacher on his use of particular moderator techniques. Some teachers have solved this problem by taking a small group of students to a free room and recording the discussion there.

Student Materials

How does one develop motivating, interesting materials for students? Our first attempt at a student handbook presented discussion techniques for participants and consisted of about one hundred pages of didactic prose. Students found at least parts of it comprehensible and informative, but they did not find it interesting. Of course, this is a major problem because student attitude has an effect on the teacher. If students don't like our materials, teachers will be less likely to use them again after the initial try-out.

Our solution to the problem was to completely redo the student handbook by shortening and illustrating it. Several pages from the revised version are given as an appendix to this paper. Students have responded quite favorably to the new format. In fact, I know of at least one teacher

training center where teacher interns rely on the student handbook, rather than the teacher handbook (which is considerably longer and more detailed), to learn the discussion skills. The lesson we have learned is that if you wish to motivate students, create materials that are concise and have high visual impact.

Providing Feedback to Students

Most of the teacher training materials developed by our program have relied on the microteaching technique of using a video recorder to provide teachers with feedback on their behavior. Most teachers respond very positively to the idea of videotaping themselves conducting a class lesson and then viewing the replay. Also, research studies have demonstrated that feedback is an important factor in helping learners (including teachers) acquire new skills. Why not, therefore, use the same technology to help students acquire the discussion skills covered in the course? In response to this question, the first version of the course included a procedure for having the teacher or a student videotape a discussion group in process and then replaying it for the whole class.

This was an idea that backfired. Some students reacted negatively to videotape feedback. They were self-conscious about their appearance and nervous about their peers viewing them in the videotape replay. Also, the presence of the video recorder appeared to have a negative impact on some discussions. Some students hammed it up, clammed up, or tittered while the camera was recording.

As a result of these experiences, we have eliminated this procedure as a recommended feature of the course. Instead, we suggest that teachers

allow time after practice discussions so that each group by itself and all the groups together can do a post-mortem on their use of the skills covered in that week's lesson.

Does the Course Work?

All training materials developed at the Far West Laboratory are evaluated by collecting quantitative data to determine whether the learner has actually changed his behavior as a result of participation in the training program. In other words, our goal is to impart skills, not just facts.

In the case of Discussing Controversial Issues, we collected audiotapes of 25-minute discussions from 32 teachers before and after their classes had participated in the training. For purposes of comparison, tapes were also collected from 13 classes (control group) which did not have the opportunity to take the course. The main results from this study are presented in Table 2.

The results demonstrate that teachers and students improved their use of some, though not all of the discussion techniques covered in the course. A few of the results went against our expectations. For example, we expected that frequency of personal attack in discussions would decrease after training. The reverse occurred. One interpretation of this finding is that as students become more open, they will feel freer to express both positive and negative affect. If this is true, we may need to rethink our ideas about what kinds of behavior are acceptable or desirable in an open exchange of views.

TABLE 2

Means for Behavioral Data with Standard Deviations in Parentheses
Study 1

VARIABLES	EXPERIMENTAL (N=32)		CONTROL (N=13)	
	Precourse Mean (S.D.)	Postcourse Mean (S.D.)	Precourse Mean (S.D.)	Postcourse Mean (S.D.)
MODERATOR BEHAVIORS				
1. Percent of teacher talk	34% (12.3)	23% (11.1)	29% (12.9)	28% (10.1)
2. Non-moderator talk	5.9 (5.0)	4.2 (2.7)	5.4 (3.9)	8.0 (5.2)
3. Calls on non-talkers	2.1 (2.1)	1.1 (1.2)	.6 (.9)	1.3 (1.9)
4. States issue explicitly	75%	84%	57%	64%
5. Questions relevancy	.1 (.3)	.4 (.7)	.3 (.6)	.2 (.3)
6. Asks for summary	.9 (.9)	1.4 (1.0)	.7 (.9)	1.0 (.7)
7. Asks for temporary agreement	.1 (.2)	.2 (.4)	.1 (.2)	.2 (.6)
8. Asks students to use techniques	.9 (1.1)	1.8 (1.5)	.7 (.8)	1.3 (1.0)
9. Asks for review	53%	81%	36%	29%
10. Asks for different positions	6%	28%	0%	7%
11. Asks for modifications	0%	16%	0%	21%
12. Asks what to do next	6%	28%	0%	0%
STUDENT BEHAVIORS				
13. Student-student interaction	6.8 (6.2)	15.0 (8.6)	13.0 (12.1)	11.4 (5.4)
14. Student talk	14.5 (7.5)	21.0 (9.1)	21.0 (12.5)	18.6 (5.6)
15. Personal attack	.1 (.3)	.6 (1.0)	.2 (.4)	.5 (1.1)
16. Acknowledges previous speaker	5.5 (5.3)	13.0 (8.1)	12.2 (12.1)	9.3 (5.1)
17. Questions irrelevancy	.0 (.1)	.4 (.7)	.0 (.1)	.2 (.3)
18. Asks for clarification	.5 (.7)	1.3 (1.5)	.8 (.8)	1.0 (1.2)
19. Asks for evidence	1.3 (2.0)	3.0 (1.9)	1.4 (1.9)	1.7 (2.0)
20. Asks about values	.1 (.2)	.5 (.9)	.1 (.2)	.5 (.6)
21. Gives accurate review	22%	47%	14%	7%
22. States others' positions	3%	25%	0%	7%
23. Modifies position	0%	22%	0%	29%
24. Discusses what to do next	6%	19%	0%	0%

Community Acceptance

While producing the course materials, the developers were concerned that they would not be accepted in some communities because the discussion of controversial issues in the classroom is itself controversial. However, we have been surprised at how receptive school districts, even in conservative communities, are to the need for a training program of this type. Of approximately fifty localities in which the materials have been field tested, only one reported that the course became "too hot to handle."

Conclusion

Experience with Discussing Controversial Issues has reconfirmed our belief that controversy has a legitimate role in the high school curriculum, and that teachers and students need training in appropriate discussion techniques. However, translating these beliefs into classroom practice presents certain logistical and value problems, which I have described in this paper. I have presented one way of dealing with them, but if there is any note to close on, it would be to emphasize the need for further inquiry into these problems so as to increase our understanding and use of controversy as a curriculum focus.

EXCERPT FROM THE TEACHER HANDBOOK OF DISCUSSING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

Giving Your Own Opinion

Teachers often wonder whether they should give their own opinions on issues discussed in class. This question is an issue for educators, with some saying that the teacher should give his opinion when asked, and others saying that the teacher should never express his own opinion. You might consider these points in making your own decision on the matter:

- If you give your opinion on an issue, make it clear that it is only your opinion and is not necessarily correct. Stress that students must make up their own minds on the issue. Otherwise, you may indoctrinate some students to your point of view, even though that isn't your intention.

- If you do wish to express your opinion, consider the timing of it. If you give your opinion near the start of the discussion, it may work against some of your discussion goals. Some students may be inclined to accept your opinion, or at least feel constraint in developing their own opinions. Also, students may spend much of the discussion questioning you further about your views. This makes you the center of attention and inhibits interaction between students. For these reasons, it's better to wait until near the end of the discussion before giving your opinion. If a student asks you what you think, you might say someting like, *"Why don't we wait 'til later on for that? First I'd like you to form your own opinion. Then I'll be happy to tell you what I think".*

- If you haven't formed an opinion and a student asks, it is quite appropriate to say something like, *"I haven't really made up my mind yet. So, as you discuss the issue, I want to listen to the evidence and arguments for each side. Later, when I've formed an opinion, I'll tell you what it is".*

- Some communities act adversely to a teacher who expresses an unpopular opinion, or any opinion at all. If you don't feel comfortable about expressing an opinion for this reason, tell the students frankly --if they ask-- that you don't feel comfortable about giving your views.

Teachers generally find that this problem is not as important as it first appears. Once students get involved in a discussion, they are generally more concerned with expressing and defining their own opinions than with learning what the teacher thinks. If you have carefully defined your role as moderator of the discussion, then it is unlikely that students will become preoccupied with your opinions on issues.

Because teachers are sometimes uncertain about their freedom to discuss controversial issues in the classroom, the appendix includes a reprint of "Academic Freedom and the Social Studies Teacher", a policy statement of the National Council for the Social Studies which provides professional sanction for the discussion of controversial issues.

EXCEPTS FROM THE STUDENT HANDBOOK OF

DISCUSSING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

understanding different points of view

lesson three

"Marijuana is great. It should be legalized."
"Marijuana's okay, but heroin and speed are bummers."
"Punish drug peddlers, not the drug user."
"Drug users are just trying to run away from their problems."
"Religion's a better trip than drugs."
"Marijuana helps you be more creative."

Before you can agree or disagree with these opinions, you may have to clarify what's being said. Suppose someone told you, "Religion's a better trip than drugs." Would you know what he meant by "trip"? Or suppose someone said, "Marijuana helps you be more creative." Creativity can mean a number of things. To understand his opinion, you'd have to ask him how he defines creativity. Is it artistic ability, being different for the sake of being different, or what?

Also, when you hear opinions, ask yourself, "I wonder why he thinks that," or "Does he have any evidence for that?" Sometimes the shoe is on the other foot. A person might ask <u>you</u> to give reasons for <u>your</u> opinion. This lesson covers types of reasons we use to defend our opinions. It also presents three discussion skills to practice:

1. Ask for clarification.
2. Ask others to give reasons for their opinions.
3. Give reasons for your opinions.

<u>An Important Point</u>:

You're entitled to your own opinion. Participants in a discussion should not force you to change it. But it's helpful if you can learn to clarify your opinions and think about your reasons for holding them.

using marijuana is bad. it'll put you on to hard drugs.
hey, far out! what do you mean by hard drugs, pete?
asking for clarification

more important than above

SKILL 1 - Ask for Clarification

This is a simple skill. If a person says something you don't understand, <u>ask</u> him about it. It might be a word that confuses you. Or the way something is said. Or simply the need to have more information. If you don't clear up the confusion when it occurs, the discussion can quickly get off the track.

if marijuana's legalized, everybody'll be on it. if its legal, it really takes the fun out of it.
i don't understand that, rita. can you explain?
asking for clarification
if they legalize it, they'll have an age limit, just like liquor. and most of the people that smoke it now are under age.
dave, are you saying, then, it shouldn't be legalized?
asking for clarification
there's some interesting research going on about how grass affects artists' work.
who's doing it?
asking for clarification

As with many skills, this one can be misused. It's a real put-down to constantly ask someone to define his terms. So, use good judgment when asking for clarification.

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